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SUBJECT: SPD DEBATES WHAT TO DO ABOUT THE LEFT PARTY

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Classified By: Political M/C John Bauman for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: The flow of some support from the SPD to The Left party -- highlighted by the recent defections of five officials of the Lower Saxony SPD to The Left -- has increased self-examination within the SPD about its future direction. Although the top party leadership has vowed to continue the centrist course, some others in the party advocate cooperation with The Left. As the CDU builds its lead over the SPD in the polls, pressure increases on the SPD to consider a future national coalition with The Left, a party often dismissed because of its discredited Marxist views. Our SPD contacts suggest that the party will continue to debate this issue for the foreseeable future, although the party's top leadership appears resolutely opposed to cooperation with The Left. End summary.

¶2. (C) As the CDU's poll numbers and Chancellor Merkel's approval rating continue to surge, the SPD's support has declined, partly because of the emergence of the new Left party. Among the general population, of those who tell pollsters they will no longer vote for the SPD, one-third are undecided, one-third will likely return support to the SPD, and another third are moving their support in equal measures to the CDU, The Left, and the Greens. These developments have prompted speculation in the media and within the party on how the SPD will respond to its eroding position. Although CDU members have told Embassy Berlin that they would not be surprised if the SPD actually moves to the right on policy matters, most discussion revolves around possible movement to the left.

SPD Chiefs Oppose Left Alliance

¶3. (SBU) Party leader Kurt Beck has said the SPD "will not retreat to the left or the right, but will go our own way" and continue its centrist Agenda 2010 approach to modernize the country's social and labor systems. Beck has rejected a national coalition with The Left because of its unrealistic prohibition of all foreign military deployments, saying if The Left party wished an isolationist path "that puts the economic and social future of the country at stake, then I see absolutely no basis for cooperation." Urging SPD parliamentarians to "confront these Pied Pipers," parliamentary caucus leader Peter Struck also called The Left's finance policy "deceptive," as it promises extensive social welfare benefits without identifying sources of funding. General Secretary Hubertus Heil also rejected the antiquated ideas of The Left, whose platform includes an 8-step plan to "overcome capitalism." Most of the SPD party rank-and-file appear to agree that the discredited ideology of The Left belongs to the past, not the future.

Some State-level Openness to The Left

¶4. (SBU) The SPD leadership does not oppose coalitions with The Left on the state level in the east (as currently exists in Berlin) where the great majority of The Left's support lies, but has ruled it out in the west. In the east, Berlin mayor Klaus Wowereit and others have spoken out against making such cooperation taboo in the west and on the national level. The SPD rank-and-file in Thuringia (state elections in early 2009) is considering cooperation with The Left as a means to return to government. In the west, despite the national party leadership's disapproval, some in the SPD are exploring state-level coalition possibilities with The Left. Hannelore Kraft, SPD chief of the western state North-Rhine Westfalia (NRW), for example, maintains that coalition options should remain a state party decision following the NRW elections in 2010, thereby leaving the door open to a future coalition with The Left. In each of the states with elections in 2008 (Lower Saxony, Hesse, and Hamburg), however, state-level SPD leaders have ruled out partnership with The Left. It is, therefore, highly unlikely that there would be an SPD-The Left coalition in a western state prior to the 2009 federal parliament elections that could inspire such cooperation on the national level.

¶5. (SBU) As for The Left, alliance with the SPD is the only realistic means for The Left to enter national government. However, hard-line Marxist ideologues in The Left argue against, in principle, any kind of participation in government because of refusal to compromise their values. Additionally, as long as Oscar Lafontaine remains a top leader of The Left, his ideological orthodoxy and the revulsion he evokes within the SPD leadership will be a barrier to future cooperation.

Looking Ahead

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¶6. (C) Comment: Despite the SPD leadership's oft-stated disdain for The Left, their cooperation with The Left at the national level cannot be ruled out altogether. If the SPD's standing in the polls continues to decline into 2009, its leadership may well conclude that they have no choice but to entertain coalition with The Left despite serious and potentially deal-breaking policy differences. But there is a mathematical deterrent to forming a government with The Left: the two parties, together, have only been able to muster about 40 percent of popular support, and this number could decline further. Leading politicians of both the SPD and CDU have spoken out against a renewal of the Grand Coalition after 2009. If it were not renewed, the SPD could pursue a center-leaning coalition with the Greens and FDP or a decidedly leftist coalition with the Greens and The Left. However, the very difficult task of cobbling together a two-party coalition platform would be made immeasurably more difficult if a third party were added to the mix. The complexities of such a coalition might prove too great to overcome. Our contacts, including SPD party strategists Stefan Ramge and Volker Meier, expect this discussion to heat up further as the party heads to its convention in October 2007. End comment.

¶7. (U) This message has been coordinated with consulates general Duesseldorf, Frankfurt, Hamburg, and Leipzig.

TIMKEN JR